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Title	Listening at the threshold: Perceptive play with voice, word and body
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Publication date	2022
Original Citation	McNeer, R. (2022) 'Listening at the threshold: Perceptive play with voice, word and body', Scenario: A Journal for Performative Teaching, Learning, Research, 16(1), pp. 149-155. https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.16.1.11
Type of publication	Article (non peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/scenario.16.1.11
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Download date	2026-11-15 14:57:38
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/13462



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University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Volume/Jahrgang 16, Issue/Ausgabe 1 (2022)
https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.16.1.11

Listening at the threshold

Perceptive play with voice, word and body

Robert McNeer

This article offers a brief overview of the intentions and methods which the author has pursued in his years of leading artistic workshops at the Waldorf English Week, an annual in-service training week for Waldorf English teachers. It includes a reflection on the effects and possible benefits of the processes in these workshops for language teachers.

1 Thespian gingerbread

Twenty-five years of leading artistic workshops at the Waldorf "English Week" have given me an opportunity to explore, with many teachers, a question which has accompanied me practically since the first time I stepped onstage, in "Hansel and Gretel", my elementary school's 1963 spring play. I was six years old, still adjusting to first grade, and I played the gingerbread boy — not perhaps the first character that comes to mind if you think of the Grimm brothers' oeuvre.

But it was an experience which fundamentally shaped my life. The gingerbread boy was part of the architecture of the evil witch's edible house, specifically, the garden gate. My task was to swing open, gate-like — following the music and counting to six — when the stranded siblings arrived at the house, and swing shut behind them, essentially sealing their fate. At the end of the scene I was to leave the stage unobtrusively, not to be seen again until the applause.

This humble task gave me no end of considerations: how, trapped in the mortal coil of my physical body, to offer convincingly the suspended *swing* of a garden gate? A gate *hangs* from hinges, whereas I was *standing* on feet. And if I just walked, bending my legs, verisimilitude required that I leave a trail of crumbs, the consideration of which confused me no end. I tried putting my weight on one leg and swinging the other, gate-like, in the air, but that often led me to accidentally kick Hansel in the ankle during the dramatic closure, spoiling the whole theatrical effect (not to mention the interpersonal consequences). As often as not, my dilemma led me to miss the cue altogether, and I think I was considered a careless actor by the ancient woman directing the play.

But I was not careless. On the contrary, I was so full of internal cares that I lost contact with the world around me. And there, as Hamlet said in other circumstances, lies the rub.

I have explored this question, inside and out, over the last forty-plus years of my theatrical career: "The actor must listen fully to his inner voice, as well as attending fully to the surrounding environment. How can one possibly do both at once?"

2 The liminal space

I think that it is not just possible, but natural, to listen simultaneously to one's inner and outer landscapes. But it requires us to overcome some habitual thinking. I have entitled my English Week workshop "Listening at the Threshold: Perceptive Play with Voice, Word and Body", which refers to the opportunity theater gives us to play in the liminal space between Myself, and the World.

This workshop aims to refine our observation of the processes surrounding us through careful observation of the others, including that which the others reflect to us of our *own* energies. Mirror and mirror-like exercises are fundamental to the work, giving us a chance to shift our focus to ourselves, our partners and, most fruitfully, to the space *between* us.

A fundamental exercise in all my theater work is the "two-hand dance", in which my partner and I each extend one of our hands so that they are not touching but in relationship, as if dancing together. As the hands move and that warm sensibility infuses the arm, the torso, and eventually the whole body, we begin to enter an important space. This space, shared by both, but controlled by neither, is where the creative work takes place. It is a space of empathy, a space of metaphor, in which the balanced meeting of two realities creates a third reality, which transcends its sources. It is a space where language and judgment fall away (Edwards, 2012).

In the work we learn to shift our focus directly to this liminal playing space, one of wonder, of empathy, normally inhabited by the clown. (Although I do not specifically teach clowning in these workshops, I borrow heavily from the clown's attitude: we too are animated by the innocence of joyful unknowing.) Focusing on this space helps free us of the usual you / me dichotomy — a shift which can help free us of our habitual (self) judgment.

Once we have found this shared play space, we can explore without fear of judgment role-playing, physical metaphor and voice work. At the same time, we focus our attention on the gathering and release of our inner processes through body work: breathing, voice and massage techniques, and visualization.

Another rich field of play is “identification”, in which I can explore the world from the point of view of a lemon, or a chair, or a Ferrari. This game is part of what I call physical metaphor, a “crossing over” into an imaginative world, which I have explored elsewhere (McNeer, 2013).

We can explore the play space not just visually and kinesthetically, but aurally: learning to listen to our own voice as if it were another's, to listen to the other's as if it were our own.

3 The emotional barometer

The voice is an important barometer to our inner state and the more sensitive we become to our own voice's potential and effects, the more refined our capacity becomes to share our inner world gracefully with our companions, as well as with our students.

An important tool in this work is synesthesia: the translation of a stimulus from one sense to another. In the “Radio Show” game, for instance, a few actors look at a painting while the others relax with their eyes closed. The actors than translate the painting into voice, for the pleasure (or not) of the “radio audience”. There is, of course, no “right” way to do this: it is an open-ended exploration of the capacity of the voice to carry meaning. We are delighted to hear the feedback of the auditors, full of image and feeling, frequently accompanying with surprising precision the visual inspiration in form, color, line, and, of course, emotion.

Again, we are working in a liminal space, bridging the gap between sight and hearing with our voices. This is another form of physical metaphor: we use our voices to “ferry over” (the root of the word “metaphor”), traversing the space which separates the eye from the ear.

Another rich field for vocal metaphor is that of the “Vocal Landscape” games: working in couples, or in groups, a vocal landscape is created which is explored, physically, by one or more people with closed eyes. Here we can discover the power of the voice as gesture, as physical act, firmly grounded in the body. In this way, we are prepared to give the spoken word its full potential.

4 Lost in translation

Practicing theater nearly all of my adult life in cultures not native to my mother tongue, I have had much opportunity, and need, to explore the nature of verbal communication. I’ve often been frustrated by the feeling that I can’t express who I really am in a foreign language (Hoffman, 2008). Especially in the first months of each language change, I have struggled with a sense of isolation, a feeling that I was being drained of meaning: finding no one to share “meaningful” conversation with; I found that even my internal monologue seemed to become poorer, as if starved by a lack of external nourishment.

The foreign language teachers that I have worked with over the years whose mother tongue was not English have often faced this situation: that of subtly judging themselves somehow less interesting, or less capable in another language — that the "foreignness" of the foreign language makes them somehow a stranger to themselves. An important part of our work is towards dialogue with that inner judge, which tells us we are somehow not enough. We address this issue from the inside, through play, and from the outside, through creative feedback.

5 Wordplay

After having warmed up our emotional, kinesthetic, proprio-centric and rhythmical/musical intelligences, we are ready to play with and through words, insisting on the non-cognitive, or rather the extra-cognitive nature of language to create spontaneous group poetry.

As a group, we improvise creative speech, and the poetry which so arises can generate rich performance material. The following began with Paul Matthews' "I Am" exercise, as presented in his wonderful book "Sing Me the Creation" (Matthews, 1995), and developed into part of a group poetry presentation. This is a deeply democratic space, a fluid zone where no one, no matter what their language background, 'knows better' what serves the game.

Voice 1: *I am the people,*
I am the floor.
I am leaves, rustling
Beyond the door.
Voice 2: *I am the footsteps, and a*
Knock on the door.
I am the light, I am the air,
I am the warm sun
On the floor.
Voice 3: *I am soft curtain tucked behind the board,*
I am hard unyielding wooden floor.
I am the gentle breeze,
White flowers on swaying trees.
Voice 2: *I am paper, against the floor moving,*
Pen, on the paper dancing,
Letters, into words becoming,
I am a ball, bouncing,
Across an empty road.
Voice 1: *I am...*
Voice 2 + 3: *...now…*
Voice 1: *I am the thought*
Beyond these fancies.

Here again, metaphor, that mysterious “between space”, is crucial, carrying a powerful charge of play. A free-association exploration of verbal metaphors in a circle can help us to shake loose our cognitive grasp on language. As in a jazz improvisation, we can delight in the wildness of words.

6 2 + 2 = much more than 4

Part of our time is dedicated to group work, in which three or four people prepare a poem to perform for the others. In this case, the individual finds herself in a communal creative process. This is a fundamental part of the work: finding a vocabulary which celebrates each individual, while bringing the poem off the page in a coherent whole — and is often the process which moves the participants most deeply. How to make sense of the mélange of passion, confusion, intuition and obsession, the jumbled quadrille which is a group creative process?

We are aware of two fundamental rules, which have become empirically manifest in my years of theater work. The first is the five-minute rule: once you start working on the poem together, if after 5 minutes you are still sitting and discussing, then something is wrong. The body knows, and the body finds a way.

The other rule, closely related, is that no idea is bad. It is only by trying it, that you find what works, and often trying something that doesn’t work will bring you to something that does. If your process brings you to more than one interpretation of the poem, by all means show them all. Variation is vital to life processes.

Some of the teachers I have worked with struggle with these rules, which go against the grain of anyone accustomed to holding themselves outside of the process to analyze it, anyone convinced that there is one, and only one, “right” way. But in my experience, anyone willing to give it a try will reap benefits in the present as well as in the future, when they find themselves joining a creative process, or facilitating one for others, as teachers working with drama will.

This “Lyrical Theater” approach has been adopted by Peter Lutzker and others both in the L2 classroom and in teacher education (see Peter Lutzker’s article on foreign language teacher education in this issue.

7 Ayes of Love

Carl Rogers, the humanist psychologist, expounded on his concept of unconditional positive regard:

> People are just as wonderful as sunsets if I let them be. When I look at a sunset, I don't find myself saying, 'Soften the orange a bit on the right hand corner.' I don't try to control a sunset. I watch with awe as it unfolds (Rogers, 1995).

A fundamental part of the work takes place in the audience. The more care I give to the manner in which I observe the others, the more I recognize that the attitude of my observation can fundamentally establish the limits of the creative space. Unconditional positive regard offers me a way to look at others without judging or trying to control them, but, as in observing a sunset, celebrating with "awe" as my companions "unfold", it allows for a creative field which is self-nourishing. It does not mean accommodating habits or inviting an anything-goes attitude, for we are very disciplined and attentive to the needs of the creative flow, but within that flow, and in respect for it, the individual can enjoy true freedom.

In this approach, the response of the audience and in particular their active emotional participation is an important factor because the actor feels the support of their unconditional regard, and thereby the courage to risk something new, rather than depending on habit. I think this is, for teachers, a critical experience. We protect ourselves with habits, and a good thing, too, as without them we would soon feel adrift. Our habits have effectively brought us to where we now stand. But in a living, communal creative process, when we recognize the grace of the audience's unconditional positive regard, we can stretch beyond our habitual limits and find our intuitive strengths, discovering that we are actually more than we thought

Paying careful attention to the manner in which we, as audience, give feedback — and the manner in which we, as actors, receive that feedback — can hone our capacity to facilitate together a creative process, without judgement or the intention to manipulate. This attention to the nature of feedback can be crucial for teachers: those working with me often realize how many unconscious expectations they have regarding the "right" way to be in front of the audience, their tendency towards "correcting" or "improving" rather than encouraging and supporting. This judgmental attitude can be directed towards the self, or towards others: equally impoverishing the interior and the exterior landscape.

Recognizing these prejudices helps us towards our own creative freedom: in not measuring by an outside standard, we are free to develop as unique individual artists and better prepared to facilitate the development of others.

This is what I call listening at the threshold. Our intention in the work, from first to last, is to practice and facilitate this care, attending not to who we are, but to who we are becoming. I feel that this listening comprehends the art of teaching.

And for the six-year-old gingerbread boy in that school play, inviting the enchanted children over the threshold? He was becoming an actor, and, potentially, a teacher, discovering a deep and abiding interest in the joy of the artistic process.

8 Why language teachers?

I sometimes receive feedback from participants at English Week like this: "I didn't learn much methodology, but I certainly now feel more at ease in front of my students, we have more fun."

Apart from making us feel very good about ourselves (and laughing, often and well), this work can give us a powerful tool for communication with those of our students who are more at home in a physical, emotional or kinesthetic world, than in a cognitive one.

I think the work can also give insight, not necessarily into a methodology, but rather into a useful attitude for practicing the art of teaching, and specifically, for inhabiting the liminal world between language cultures. I explore this in more detail in an interview with Ulrike Sievers (2016).

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